

# Moving With a Teen

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*Moving countries is a great challenge for adults, but for teenagers it's even harder. That shouldn't discourage you from moving, particularly if relocation opens new opportunities for the whole family. What you will need is awareness of what to expect, planning, extra effort and lots of patience.*

When my daughters turned thirteen (one year apart), they became different. As if overnight, my 'cute girls' became strangers whose (over)reactions were unreasonable, argumentative and filled with disregard for me as a parent most of the time. From being their trusted guide, nurturer and 'know-best' person I became someone who 'knew nothing', 'had no idea' and 'was totally out of touch'. All my suggestions and directions were dismissed before I even had time to explain myself. What seemed as an opportunity to me, for them was a challenge that they had to fight against at any cost.

Relocating countries opens up many opportunities, not only for adults, but for the whole family. However, many miss out on these opportunities, because their children have reached that dreaded *teen* age.

So what makes teenagers so difficult to live with at the best of times, what deters us from relocating countries and anticipating great difficulties if we do it?

## Why Teens Have More Difficulty Moving

Adolescence is a challenging time for young people and their families. A teen is going through rapid physical and emotional changes, dealing with new social and psychological issues unlike anything experienced before. Any additional external change, like relocation, will most probably be received by your teen as unwelcome news, and they will express their reluctance and objections very loudly, although not always very clearly.

The first thing your teen will think of will be '*What about me and my friends?*'. Adolescence is the time when teenager is putting an enormous amount of effort into finding friends, becoming part of groups and being accepted by them. This is not just for some light-hearted social reasons, but more so because a teen is creating and starting to define their identity through social interactions. Their friends are part of who they are, and separation from them is a direct attack on the early formed sense of self. Relocating doesn't only mean leaving part of them behind, it also means that they have to do it all over again, this time in an unknown town and school, with people they have no previous connection to. Fear of unknown and uncertainty are very real for them too. Teenagers are unable to articulate it, but no wonder they get very upset if you make a decision that they have to leave behind everything they worked so hard on.

Another internal conflict is the one between wanting freedom and independence and at the same time still needing the security of the family. They wouldn't want to admit it, but their home and family are the only stability they have, and relocation is threatening to dislocate it.

Parents too want their teen to grow to happy independence and become a young adult. Not unlike teens who often think of themselves as adults, ever so prematurely. When you tell them that the family is moving, what they hear you saying is 'you are far from being an adult and making independent decisions'.

## What to Avoid and What to Do More Of

Getting your teenager to leave their home, school and most importantly their friends is not going to be easy. One thing to avoid is to ignore their feelings and pretend that you are the boss and they have to do as you say. You will only create an additional challenge before, during and particularly after your move.

Being aware of what to expect is the first step. Planning ahead, some extra effort and lots of patience will further help in convincing your teenager to move.

Having a good relationship with your teen is important at any time and particularly critical at the time of big changes when it can ensure a smooth(er) transition through ups and downs.

Relocation does not happen overnight, and you will have plenty of time to engage with your teenager in minimizing their anxiety and getting their 'buy in' at some stage.

- Sometimes your teen will react angry and in disagreement even though they don't really object the move. The only thing they object may be that they were not consulted or being told soon enough. Don't let your teen's disagreement deter you from relocating; however, engage them as soon as you start contemplating the move. That way they'll feel part of the process, even though they may not wholeheartedly agree to it. At least they will not be able to accuse you of 'never been told you were thinking of moving'.
- If a teenager starts to complain and present numerous reasons why you shouldn't relocate, it is important that you listen to them. Listening without arguing or making a point will show them that you are concerned about their feelings. Say that you understand how they feel, and you will take it into account.
- Plan the move around school semester breaks, if possible during the long summer break. For those moving to Australia this may be difficult, given the opposite seasons and therefore coordinating the school endings and beginnings, compared with the countries of North America, Europe and most of Asia. Find when schools break for holidays and plan the best you can.
- If your teen is in their last school year consider leaving them with relatives or a good friend. Relocation will not only disrupt their social networks, but more importantly their academic performance. It is not worth it. Your teen can always join you once the school finishes, and visit you during the holidays.
- Scheduled times in advance when your teen can return to visit their friends and family left behind. That way the permanency of relocation will not appear so overwhelming.
- Before the move, give your teen some tasks to find out about the new country and town you are moving in. Your teen will feel involved, less anxious, and it will also help you learn about your new surroundings.
- During the move ask your teen to participate in packing. If you worry that they will not do it 'right', then assign a task that even if not performed to your standards will be helpful. At the time of relocation any help is welcome!
- If you also have a younger child, ask your teen to assist you by looking after them during the move. This will be of great help to you and will give your teen a sense of responsibility that their forming adult is so much in need of.
- Ensure that your teen has plenty of ways to communicate with their friends. Today this is so easy by using the Internet, Skype, mobile phone and SMS. A digital camera is a great way of keeping connected by taking photos and sending to friends. It will give a teen something creative and constructive to do and take pride in.
- Once you come to the new location, encourage your teen to get involved in activities, whether at school or outside of it. You know their interests, maybe there are some that have been neglected and now it is the time to re-visit them. Mixing with people with similar interests will facilitate formation of new social networks.

## **What Else Can Parents Do?**

Even if you do all the right things, your teen may still feel upset and angry. Don't let them make you feel guilty. Guilt is something that is too closely associated with relocation. You will feel guilty for leaving your other family members, life-long friends, work... don't add to it by feeling guilty for your teenager's upset. Eventually they will accept the relocation, build new networks and settle in their new surroundings. Few years down the track they'll probably be grateful for having the opportunity to see the world, meet new people and learn new things.

In the new home continue working on the relationship with your teen, and endure through the times of rejection:

- Spend time together – during mealtimes, in the car, at bedtime, or creating some new 'coffee time' are all good situations to learn about your teen and their concerns.
- Listen – giving advice and lecturing are communication killers. Keep communication lines open by using phrases like 'How come?', 'How did that make you feel?', 'What do you think about this?'
- Show love – it doesn't matter that your teen is no longer a little child; you have to continually show that you love them. You can do it in many ways: say it, put little treats in their lunch box, write them messages if you are not going to be home when they arrive from school, buy something small and say 'I was thinking about you so I got you this.', help them with projects and pick them up from outings even if it is late at night and on the other side of town. Offer to give a lift to their friends too, that way you will get to meet them and learn who your teen is socializing with.
- Take and share interest – be curious about music they are listening to, books they are reading, people they are seeing. You may not always get an answer, so be persistent. Watch them play their sport games and activities, and watch TV shows that they enjoy. Tell them about things you like, about your work and people you meet. Tell them about your growing up and how it was for you. Ask them to join you to a movie, and pick one that they'd like.
- Respect privacy – we all need our space, and this is equally important for a teen. Try not to enter their room without permission and search through their drawers and bags. Sometimes it's hard if you have to clean the room, so inform them of exceptions. That may influence them to do their own cleaning.
- Set rules - make clear that some things are not open for negotiation, for example you will always need to know where they are going, who with and when they are coming home. Explain it has nothing to do with control, rather safety. Remember to give the same information about your whereabouts.
- Create memories – sometimes we don't feel like getting out of our way, but often little sacrifices create memories for a lifetime. Let your teen bring a friend when going on a holiday, create traditions special to your family (your family's way of celebrating birthdays), make birthday card with photographs from their childhood and growing up years, family and close friends.
- Trust – your teen is special and let them know it. If they make a mistake have trust in them that they will do the right thing next time, or at least in a few years time, once the 'teen-age' is over.

My two girls are finally coming to the end of their teen-age. Amongst many things, they taught me that teenagers are unpredictable. One day they are the best kid you could wish for and you are congratulating yourself on 'work well done', the next you question if 'this person' has been swapped at birth. All you can do is be aware and try your best. Give them some time and space to get adjusted, at the same time observe them carefully. If you see any signs of poor health, depression, disruption of eating patterns, total withdrawal and poor academic results, consult a professional. There are counsellors and coaches who will help both, parents and teenagers to overcome the challenges of life including relocation.

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